Starving by numbers: William Farr, medical statistics and the social aesthetics of hunger

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Starving by Numbers
William Farr, Medical Statistics and the Social Aesthetics of Hunger

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Abstract This essay considers how literary and medical representations of hunger developed into an impure aesthetic in the nineteenth century. With specific reference to the Social Problem Novel, it questions how the tension between traditional, folkloric understandings of hunger and more positivist approaches by medical statisticians raised important questions about how we understand poverty and suffering.

Keywords Literature. Medicine. Starvation. Statistics.

> I lay by the side of a brook resting from my fatigue, until I felt tormented by hunger and thirst. This roused me from my nearly dormant state, and I ate some berries which I found hanging on the trees, or lying on the ground. I slaked my thirst at the brook, and then lying down, was overcome by sleep.
>
> (Mary Shelley)

So narrates the ill-fated Creature of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). The novel, as countless critics have pointed out, is extraordinary for its studies of the human condition, which include subjects as broad as the disastrous effects of ambition, the limits and reaches of science, the development of perception and intelligence, and, most important to the aims of my essay, the impact and importance of an 'aesthetic' representation of hardship and loss. «Listen to my tale», «hear my tale», say Frankenstein and his monster respectively, as they begin the narratives with which they outline their miserable experiences. The Creature's own hunger forms an emotive aspect to his story but so too does the hunger of the De Lacey family:

> A considerable period elapsed before I discovered one of the causes of the uneasiness of this admirable family; it was poverty: and they suffered that evil in a very distressing degree. Their nourishment consisted entirely of the vegetables of their garden, and the milk of one cow, who gave very little during the winter, when its masters could scarcely procure food to support it. They often, I believe, suffered the pangs of

> hunger very poignantly, especially the two younger cottagers; for several times they placed food before the old man, when they reserved none for themselves. (Butler 1998, p. 88)

The Creature's understanding of the emotional aspect of hunger is simultaneous with an aestheticization of the same. «I was deeply affected by it», he says, it «moved me sensibly» (pp. 87-88). Such responses may be influenced by the Creature's own memories of hungering in the forests of Ingolstadt, but it also has much to do with his learning about literature and, specifically, how narrative shapes and gives life to loss and privation. It is in his hovel by the side of the De Lacey cottage that he reads *Plutarch's Lives* (1517) *Paradise Lost* (1667), and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) – books that portray loss and tragedy and explore the relationship between these themes and the form of the literary lament. «I can hardly describe to you the effect of these books», says the Creature, «They produced in me an infinity of new images and feelings, that sometimes raised me to ecstacy, but more frequently sunk me into the lowest dejection» (p. 103). It is also in his hovel that the Creature first hears the De Laceys' history of condemnation: «Some time elapsed before I learned the history of my friends. It was one which could not fail to impress itself deeply on my mind, unfolding as it did a number of circumstances each interesting and wonderful to one so utterly inexperienced as I was» (pp. 97-98). Readers of the novel might say the same thing about the Creature himself; his various experiences of hunger (physiological, social, and intellectual) are saddening because they form part of a larger story of misery. His narrative encourages us to sympathise with a murderer – not with his violence at all – but with the sorrows that lead up to it.

In the voice of Frankenstein's Monster we hear an echo of how hunger is understood and communicated through narrative. Hunger is an instinct and a basic physiological need, yet it is also a tradition of writing – an aesthetic that has for centuries turned base animal sensations into a humanitarian problem and a lament. As forms go, this is one of the oldest. In *Famine: A Short History,* Cormac Ó Gráda notes that «famine is remembered in folklore and oral history» (Ó Gráda 2009, p. 7). Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs from the Island of Sehel give the following account from the Third Dynasty (2686-13 BCE):

> I was in mourning on my throne,
> Those of the palace were in grief,
> My heart was in great affliction,
> Because [the flood] had failed to come in time
> In a period of seven years.
> Grain was scant,
> Kernels were dried up,
> Scarce was every kind of food.

> Every man robbed his twin, […]
> Children cried,
> Youngsters fell,
> The hearts of the old were grieving;
> Legs drawn up, they hugged the ground,
> Their arms clasped about them.
> Courtiers were needy,
> Temples were shut,
> Shrines covered with dust,
> Everyone was in distress.
> (Quoted in Lichtheim 1980, pp. 95-96)

As the Irish famines of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were to show with equal poignancy, the concept of hunger, as a social catastrophe, has been inseparable from popular oral traditions. It was in the nineteenth century, with seemingly misguided legislation leaving many a man, woman and child undernourished, that this method of 'storifying' hunger became its most politically charged. According to Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), for example:

> Cast into the whirlpool, [the poor man] must struggle through as well as he can. […] If he can get no work he may steal, if he is not afraid of the police, or starve, in which case the police will take care that he does so in a quiet and inoffensive manner. During my residence in England, at least twenty or thirty persons have died of simple starvation under the most revolting circumstances, and a jury has rarely been found possessed of the courage to speak the plain truth in the matter. […] But indirectly, far more than directly, many have died of starvation, where long-continued want of proper nourishment has called forth fatal illness, when it has produced such debility that causes which might otherwise have remained inoperative brought on severe illness and death.
> (Kiernan 1987, pp. 69-70)

The cause of this state of affairs, according to Engels, is modern «capital, the direct or indirect control of the means of subsistence and production» (p. 69). There is no collectively-experienced famine in the English towns, he says, «it is only individuals who starve» (p. 70), yet they do so in the dark and in the dirt. Rarely has a jury been inclined, he notes, to «speak the plain truth» and, though his account of the poor man is a hypothetical one, it nevertheless belongs to a tradition of folkloric narration. Addressing «Working Men» in his preface, Engels says:

> I have studied the various official and non-official documents as far as I was able to get hold of them – I have not been satisfied with this, I

> wanted more than a mere *abstract* knowledge of my subject. I wanted to see you in your own homes, to observe you in your every-day life, to chat with you on your condition and grievances, to witness your struggles against the social and political power of your oppressors. [… I] devoted my leisure-hours almost exclusively to the intercourse with plain working men; I am both glad and proud of having done so. (p. 27)

Engels feels the need to supplement his research with his own observations and with the stories that working men tell. What his book represents, then, is a mixture of first-hand observations, facts and figures from government committee papers, and stories of the plights of individual workers and workforces. An obviously political venture, *Condition of the Working Classes* uses an aesthetics of impurity that has come to be associated with the nineteenth century – a preoccupation with miserable stories, not solely as a form of lament, but also as a form of social realism and political statement.

It is worth revisiting well-known «Condition of England» texts with a view to exploring how hunger might have been aestheticized. Criticism has tended to take as read the nineteenth century's humanitarian 'discovery' of starvation. What I argue is that the period saw a radical overhaul of the concept of hunger; it went from a one-dimensional lamentation to a complex, messy even, source of debate between politicians, statisticians, doctors, journalists and writers of fiction. We see this shift figured in *Bleak House* (1852-53) where Tom-All-Alone's is introduced as follows:

> Much mighty speech-making there has been, both in and out of Parliament, concerning Tom, and much wrathful disputation how Tom shall be got right. Whether he shall be put into the main road by constables, or by beadles, or by bell-ringing, or by force of figures, or by correct principles of taste, or by high church, or by low church, or by no church; whether he shall be set to splitting trusses of polemical straws with the crooked knife of his mind or whether he shall be put to stone-breaking instead. In the midst of which dust and noise there is but one thing perfectly clear, to wit, that Tom only may and can, or shall and will, be reclaimed according to somebody's theory but nobody's practice. And in the hopeful meantime, Tom goes to perdition head foremost in his old determined spirit. (Sanders 1994, p. 568)

It is well known that Dickens was keen to promote a balance between the age's «tendency to be frightfully literal and catalogue-like» (Hoppé 1966, vol. 2, p. 279) and the kind of compassionate overview which he saw his own brand of storytelling as exemplifying. In Dickens's polemics we catch a glimpse of the shift in the way hunger was understood and represented. No longer an impotent outcry against acts of God like a barren floodplain,

stories of hunger became interested in the ways empirical data could be used in the fight against the worst effects of the industrial age. The novel form, as Dickens shows, became a key means of addressing the balance between sympathy and hard statistics. What I suggest, then, is that we see the Social Problem Novel as a place in which the forces of the lament, on the one hand, and newer energies of statistical and scientific observation, on the other, are brought into productive and illuminating dialogue.

The «Condition of England» novels highlight how the emotional aspect of hunger was felt to be at risk of getting cordoned off during the first half of the nineteenth century. The New Poor Law had had the ambition or the effect of 'tidying away' the pauper class by consigning it to workhouses and slum silos. The folkloric tradition of 'storifying' hunger appears to have been under some threat from the new measures simply because expressing oneself artistically from within the pauper camp was next to impossible. Such is made clear in Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet; An Autobiography* (1850), when the protagonist describes his literary labours:

> When my kind cough awoke me, I rose, and creeping like a mouse about the room – for my mother and sister slept in the next chamber, and every sound was audible through the narrow partition – I drew my darling books out from under a board on the floor […].
>
> No wonder that with this scanty rest, and this complicated exertion of hands, eyes, and brain, followed by the long dreary day's work of the shop, my health began to fail; my eyes grew weaker; my cough became more acute; my appetite failed me daily. […] Look at the picture awhile, ye comfortable folks, who take down from your shelves what books you like best at the moment, and then lie back, amid prints and statuettes, to grow wise in an easy chair, with a blazing fire and a camphine lamp. The lower classes uneducated! Perhaps you would be so too, if learning cost you the privation which it costs some of them. (Cripps 1983, pp. 36-37)

Of course, what applies to Locke's reading also applies to his writing. When he produces a set of poems based on the style of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1816-18) and the works of Tennyson, he is asked by the radical book seller Sandy Mackay, «Are ye gaun to be like they puir aristocrat bodies that wad suner hear an Italian dog howl, than an English nightingale sing, and winna harken to Mr. John Thomas till he calls himself Giovanni Thomasino» (p. 86). Mackay then takes the hero to St. Giles:

> Look! there's not a soul down that yard but's either beggar, drunkard, thief, or warse. Write anent that! Say how ye saw the mouth o' hell, and the two pillars thereof at the entry – the pawnbroker's shop o' one side and the gin palace at the other – twa monstrous deevils, eating up men, and women, and bairns, body and soul. Look at the jaws o' the

> monsters, how they open and open, and swallow in anither victim and anither. Write anent that. […] Which is maist to your business? – thae bare-backed hizzies that play the harlot o' the other side o' the warld, or these – these thousands o' bare-backed hizzies that play the harlot o' your ain side – made out o' your ain flesh and blude? You a poet! True poetry, like true charity, my laddie, begins at hame. (p. 88)

Contained within this important passage is the manifesto of Locke's Chartist poetry as it develops. This is not the art of «beauty as truth and truth as beauty», but the aesthetics of ugly truth; beauty, imagination, and the exotic must play second fiddle to the grim realities of modern London. This is because, as Mackay knows, true poetry is also powerfully political. It is shown to be so by the text itself when it portrays the middle-class dean's willingness to patronise Locke's poetry so long as the more radical elements are left out. Similarly, the protagonist is convinced by his second love interest, Eleanor Staunton, that his vocation is to travel to America and write about his explorations. Predictably, the poet dies *en route*. Robbed of his polemic realism, he is pressed out of a narrative that comes to represent, self-reflexively, mid-century discussions of the social question.

One prominent example of the drift towards the quarantining of the Condition of England question was felt to be found, as we know from Dickens, in the work of political economists and statisticians. Their belief, speaking generally, was that human development obeyed certain «laws». Statistician William Farr believed, for example, that the force of figures was key to understanding the real nature of hunger. According to John M. Eyler:

> Farr agreed wholeheartedly that the phenomena of life and death were law-abiding, and he believed rational medicine possible only when such vital laws were assumed. […] Early in his career Farr explained, «observation proves that generations succeed each other, develop their energies, are afflicted with sickness, and waste in the procession of their life, according to fixed laws». (Eyler 1979, p. 32)

It is easy to see why this idea displeased Dickens. The view that men live in predictable patterns ran the risk of erasing their basic human qualities, as well as barring the kind of emotional responses that their suffering had encouraged in more traditional forms like the lament. Farr, however, did recognise that statistics had the potential to reduce stories of suffering to a clipped and unrepresentative number. He had, according to Eyler, «a sensibility more finely tuned by human sympathy and social ideology» than some of his contemporaries: «he rejected the mindless garnering of numbers and had nothing but scorn for the empiric who throws heaps of tables in our faces, and asserts that he can prove anything by figures» (p. 29). In

a letter to the registrar general Thomas Lister, Farr paused a statistical account of the condition of London paupers in order to tell a story:

> Medical practitioners meet with many distressing cases of starvation in this metropolis. I will mention one. In the winter of 1838 I was requested, in the middle of the night, to see a woman, who, it was said, was dying for want of help. I followed the messenger through a labyrinth of narrow passages, near Fitzroy market, and found in the corner of an attic a young woman, thinly clad, lying on a straw bedspread upon the floor. She had given birth to a child, then at her feet. Three children lay on the same bed, under a single rug. It was intensely cold. She had no fire, no candle, no food, and, if I recollect right, had not more than three half-pence in money to meet the exigencies of child-birth. The lodgers in the room below had been aroused by her groans. (Farr 1840, p. 163)

It is worth reminding ourselves that this is the work of a statistician; it is not the kind of «reduction» identified by Dickens but a picture that has much in common with Dickens's own account of Tom-All-Alone's. Farr's example has all the powerful impact of the oral tradition surrounding hunger: memories get converted into parables that are designed to produce an emotional response. We have a cautionary example here of the problem with assigning sympathetic attributes to literature, on the one hand, and seeing dispassionate empiricism as typical of science, on the other. The dialogue between these two forces (sympathy and empiricism) has always, to use the words of Mary Poovey, developed unevenly. When it came to the representation of hunger, in particular, literature and science shared the same burden of seeking to balance these complex energies.

Eyler correctly surmises that «part of the reason for Farr's more sophisticated understanding of statistics and his greater willingness to discuss the practical implications of [the same] is to be found in his medical bias» (Eyler 1979, p. 29). Farr had been trained as a physician in the medical schools of Paris, even though he was himself from working-class stock. He was born in 1807 to a farm labourer and had had to be apprenticed at the early age of 8 because his family was struggling to make ends meet. Offered several schooling opportunities by his employer, Farr eventually inherited £500 from the same benefactor and pursued a medical education. In 1836, he appeared in *The Lancet* with a couple of lectures on hygiene and public health. In these pieces he was already showing his aptitude for social and statistical medicine, yet his medical training also appeared to have introduced him to many of the personal stories of the social ills he was counting up in his statistical studies. He had administered to the needs of the poor himself, and he knew that behind many a set of figures there was a sad story and a real set of symptoms.

In 1837 Farr complained to Edwin Chadwick at the Poor Law Commission, «your offices are too much occupied, and have too little acquaintance – practical acquaintance – with the subject – to do much in medical statistics» (Farr 1837, p. 148). In 1839 he compiled, for the newly-formed Registrar General's Office, a report on the health and longevity of Britons. In it he wrote:

> It will be seen with regret that in the half-year the deaths of 63 individuals were ascribed (principally at inquests) to starvation; this is almost 1 annually to a population of 11,000. The want of food implies the want of everything else – except water – as firing, clothing, every convenience, every necessary of life, is abandoned at the imperious bidding of hunger. Hunger destroys a much higher proportion than is indicated by the registers in this and in every other country; but its effects, like the effects of excess, are generally manifested indirectly, in the production of diseases of various kinds. The privation is rarely absolute; the supply of food is inadequate to supply the wants of the organization, which requires daily animal or vegetable matter containing not less than nine ounces of carbon. (quoted in Glass 1973, p. 146)

Farr's findings greatly displeased Chadwick who had been one of the chief architects of the New Poor Law, and who preferred to believe that the new measures had eradicated starvation in Britain. Farr's comments, Chadwick said in a letter to the Registrar General, are «calculated to produce a belief that the provisions of the law, which are intended to bring relief within the reach of every one needing it, are either inadequate to their object or improperly administered» (Chadwick 1839, p. 150). He and the other Commissioners set about discrediting the report. Not all of its 63 starved individuals were counted from coroner's reports, they found, and of those 63 at least 36 were infants who had died during weaning. Of the adults who had died, a number had refused to go to the workhouse:

> Jane Morris (condition of life not stated), aged 47 years, died in the House of Industry, Oswestry, Salop, 18th of September, 1837. Cause assigned in the registry, «*For want of the common necessaries of life, refusing the protection of the house*».

Ester Beaumont (condition not stated), aged 57 years, died at Sheffield, Brightside Bierlow, Yorkshire, 31st August, 1837. Cause assigned in the registry, «*Want of the common necessaries of life*» (p. 157).

What is remarkable about these accounts is their matter-of-fact style. Gone are the long, sentimental laments we see in other accounts of hunger and, standing in their stead, is a series of sentences that indicate, while they smother, histories of privation: «*Want of the common necessaries of*

life». A Parish clerk was able to give more information about Ester Beaumont, the last-mentioned Pauper in Chadwick's letter. As a result of the New Law, Ester had lost the outdoor relief she was in receipt of and had been offered, instead, a place in the Workhouse. It seems extraordinary that the Poor Law Commissioners saw her story as a defence of their work rather than a condemnation of it. When the Commission's bare facts get supplemented by a fuller narrative they do more than support the measures of the new legislation; they recapture some of the pathos that had traditionally accompanied the aesthetics of hunger. Written into Chadwick's own account, through accident more than design, was a tension between the figures used as advocacy of the parish system, and the narrative aspects of hunger, which always signalled a cause for humanitarian concern.

While Farr conceded that he was wrong to attribute all of his results to coroners' inquests, he seized upon the obvious conflict in the argument of the Commission: if just one person died of starvation in a relatively affluent country like Britain, then surely this is enough to cause some human, if not professional, concern. Yes, 36 of the 63 may have been infants, but what of the rest? At least 13 people in the table provided by the Commissioners are acknowledged to have died from malnourishment. Farr concludes: «whether starvation occurred therefore in infants, or in the aged; whether it was accidental, inevitable, or the result of negligence, the fact itself remained unchanged; it was still starvation» (Farr 1840, p. 164). And «if there should be one death the less, 'for the future', I ask no other vindication» (p. 167). At the time he was writing *Alton Locke,* Kingsley wrote something very similar to his wife:

> *We* may choose to look at the masses in the gross, as subjects for statistics – and of course, where possible, of profits. There is One above who knows every thirst and ache, and sorrow, and temptation of each slattern, and gin-drinker, and street boy. The day will come when He will require an account of these neglects of ours not in the gross. (Kingsley 1894, vol. 1, p. 180)

Indeed, Farr's earlier comment about the Poor Law Commission's lack of «practical acquaintance» with medical questions appeared to be vindicated. The Commission's concerns with figures, averages and tables had led them away from the basic fact that suffering is suffering, whether it is experienced by one or one-million. As Engels pointed out, it was individuals who starved, not aggregates. To understand the impact of this melancholy fact required an ability to tune into the stories of the few as well as the statistics of the many.

Unsurprisingly, Farr rejected Thomas Malthus's famous claim that famine was the last resort of nature when other «checks» of population growth, such as «war […], sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague» had

failed (Gilbert 2008, p. 61; Farr 1840, p. 165). As James Vernon observes, Malthus's ideas grew into a belief that «the hungry were objects of opprobrium, not compassion, and any attempt to alleviate their suffering was thought to make them more, not less, dependent» (Vernon 2007, p. 174). In response to the Irish Famine, for instance, Sir Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the British Treasury, noted:

> That indirect permanent advantages will accrue to Ireland from the scarcity and the measures taken for its relief, I entertain no doubt. […] The greatest improvement of all which could take place in Ireland would be to teach the people to depend upon themselves for developing the resources of their country, instead of having recourse to the assistance of the government on every occasion. (Trevelyan 1846, p. 70)

With the tools of medical experience up his sleeve, Farr was able to contest both this point and the New Poor Law ideologies that grew from it. In his view, social, medical and moral problems stemmed from want, rather than preceded it. A high number of medical accounts of hunger in the nineteenth century came from forensic textbooks. Forensic medicine, or «medical jurisprudence» as it was often known at the time, had an interest in civic health, which it often called «medical police» or «state medicine». Later texts such as J. Dixon Mann's *Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* (1893) featured whole chapters on starvation, because, as Mann points out, cases «come under the notice of the medical jurist [usually because] young children or adults of feeble intellect [had] been entirely neglected both as regards nourishment and bodily attention» (Mann 1893, p. 309). The circumstances outlined here are very different to those discussed by Farr and the Poor Law Commission, yet the forensic aspect of hunger shows, most clearly, the medical determination to understand the problem as a story as well as a bare statistic. Mann was a professor of medical jurisprudence in Manchester so he would have been no stranger to the debates introduced by widespread urban problems. He outlines the symptoms of starvation as follows:

> The natural feeling of hunger which indicates to a healthy person that the organism is in want of food, disappears after the first thirty-six or forty-eight hours of fasting. There may be a pain and discomfort in the region of the stomach, but it is not associated with a desire for food. Intense thirst is always present, and want of fluids greatly increases the sufferings. Muscular weakness gradually occurs, and is quickly attended by emaciation, which is progressive until the end. The skin is wrinkled and is usually pale, dry, and of a parchmenty appearance […]. The features and eyes are sunken, and the malar bones stand prominently out. The mouth and tongue are dry, and the breath has a disagreeable odour, which in some stages of starvation is of an ether-like nature; at a later

> stage the whole body gives off a peculiar putrescent odour, but unlike that of ordinary putrefaction. […] To use a popular phrase, the limbs are little more than skin and bone. The mind may remain clear or may be enfeebled to imbecility; hallucinations are not uncommon. (p. 310)

Mann uses a matter-of-fact tone and yet his enumeration of the symptoms allows him to outline a narrative as sad as any of Dickens's in its own way: it is like he is describing an image, or a body on a post-mortem table, yet terms like «progressive until the end» and «a later stage» also indicate that what is being described is a process, not anything 'inevitable' (like an act of God) or abstract like a set of statistics. This passage is markedly different in tone, for example, to Chadwick's «*want of the common necessaries of life*». In spite of its obvious links with the empirical tradition, medicine had, as part of its professional arsenal, an ability to focus on problems as a set of symptoms. Symptoms might be a series of facts, but they might also be developing a story: they grow; they pursue a journey through various stages and they lead, like the Victorian novel, to two possible resolutions: death or the restoration of order. What I argue is that the medico-narrativization of hunger achieved a balance between the subject's long-held associations with pathos and a newer element of scientific observation.

As it emerged in the novel of the mid-nineteenth century, indeed, hunger fits the model of Hugh Grady's «impure aesthetic»:

> The idea of the aesthetic, like all our concepts, is a social construct, a signifier whose signified derives from a series of intricate networks, within itself, and with the fragmented world of a complex new, «modern» society. For these reasons, I am arguing, the aesthetic is intrinsically «impure» – it is a place-holder for what is repressed elsewhere in the system; it develops as an autonomous practice but participates in the market economy, the social-system, the political world, the religious communities, and private life. (Grady 2009, p. 21)

In the pages of the Social Problem Novel the aesthetics of hunger was impure for a number of reasons. It was not, as it had been, a one-sided lament, but an knotted subject with polemic currency; it emerged from, and responded to, a range of discourses on hunger – some of which, like medicine, sought to rediscover the means of regretting hunger while recasting it as a series of scientific, economic and political queries.

Like the writings of William Farr, Kingsley's *Alton Locke* was a response to the perceived statistical tendency towards the simplification of starvation. As such, the novel developed an impassioned response to government reports; it also appropriated the desire to represent hunger as a teleological process which crystallised larger narratives of want. Take, for instance, Locke's experience of being both a Cockney and a poet:

> I do not complain that I am a Cockney. That, too, is God's gift. He made me one, that I might learn to feel for poor wretches who sit stifled in reeking garrets and workrooms, drinking in disease with every breath – bound in their prison-house of brick and iron, with their own funeral pall hanging over them, in that canopy of fog and poisonous smoke, from their cradle to their grave. I have drunk of the cup of which they drink. And so I have learnt – if, indeed, I have learnt – to be a poet – a poet of the people. That honour, surely, was worth buying with asthma, and rickets, and consumption, and weakness, and – worst of all to me – with ugliness. (Cripps 1983, p. 6)

Alton's working-class roots are what enable him to engage with the real experiences of tailors. Like the medical man, he has direct experience with the material symptoms of abjection yet, as a poet, he has the narrational skills to portray them most effectively. His tools of narrative expression make the problem an immediate reality rather than an abstract statistic. At another point in the novel the protagonist collapses in the street from want:

> So on I went with [a] kind-hearted [policeman], who preached solemnly to me all the way on the fifth commandment. But I heard very little of it; for before I had proceeded a quarter of a mile, a deadly faintness and dizziness came over me. I staggered, and fell against the railings.
> «And have you been a-drinking arter all?»
> «I never – a drop in my life – nothing but bread-and-water this fortnight».
> And it was true. I had been paying for my own food, and had stinted myself to such an extent, that between starvation, want of sleep, and over-exertion, I was worn to a shadow, and the last drop had filled the cup […]. I dropped on the pavement, bruising my face heavily. (p. 58)

Alton is then picked up by a couple of medical men. «I tell you what», says one of them, «this fellow's very bad. He's got no more pulse than the Pimlico sewer» (p. 59). Alton has many of the symptoms outlined by J. Dixon Mann and his experiences offer a representation of the effects of hunger as a developing story. Addressing the men who help him after his collapse, Alton the narrator acknowledges in them the kind of direct knowledge of the ugly realities that the poet himself aspires to:

> I have never met you again, but I have not forgotten you. Your early life [student years] may be coarse, too often a profligate one – but you know the people, and the people know you: and your tenderness and care, bestowed without hope of repayment, cheers daily many a poor soul in hospital wards and fever-cellars – to meet its reward some day at the people's hands. You belong to us at heart. (pp. 61-62)

A keen scientist himself, Kingsley portrays the natural sciences, through the benevolent yet conservative dean as powerful so long as they are based on observation rather than mathematical logic:

> But logic, like mathematics, seems to tell me too little about things. It does not enlarge my knowledge of man or nature; and those are what I thirst for. […] I see you stealing glances at those natural curiosities [lining the dean's study]. In the study of them you will find, as I believe more and more daily, a mental discipline superior to that which language or mathematics can give. (p. 165)

The dean's scientific preferences are compatible with the novel's own, which tally, in turn, with those of William Farr: mathematics will take the social project only so far but narration and direct contact with the realities of life is what teaches the most significant aspects. Like Farr, *Alton Locke* thus rejects the Malthusian approach. Speaking to a fellow-tailor and Chartist, Alton asks:

> «Oh! Crossthewaite, are children not a blessing?»
> «[…] No, my lad. – Let those bring slaves into the world who will! I will never beget children to swell the numbers of those who are trampling each other down in the struggle for daily bread, to minister in in ever deepening poverty and misery to the rich man's luxury – perhaps his lust». (p. 112)

«Then you believe in the Malthusian doctrines?» Alton asks, not unreasonably: «I believe them to be an infernal lie, Alton Locke» (p. 112). Crossthwaite's Trade Unionism dictates that he should be alert to suffering and injustice as a collective grievance, yet any idea of privation as a collective desert is rejected firmly. The reason for this refusal is that, like Locke, Crossthwaite has seen and experienced individual instances of misery, and, typical of the radical orator, he relies upon stories in forming and understanding the problem and its solutions.

For Crossthwaite, the solution is to be found in Chartism, and Locke becomes convinced of the same after he encounters instances of suffering, like the two children he finds working as agricultural labourers. These «little half-starved shivering animals» are described in ways that appear to have some sensitivity to the medico-narrative way of understanding hunger:

> As we came up to the fold, two little boys hailed us from the inside – two little wretches with blue noses and white cheeks, scarecrows of rags and patches. […] They seemed too small for such exertion: their little hands were purple with chilblains, and they were so sorefooted they could

> scarcely limp. I was surprised to find them at least three years older than their size and looks denoted, and still more surprised, too, to find that their salary for all this bitter exposure to the elements – such as I believe I could not have endured two days running – was the vast sum of one shilling a week each, Sundays included. (p. 257)

Other members of the agricultural class are then described:

> I was struck with the wan, haggard look of all faces; their lack-lustre eyes and drooping lips, stooping shoulders, heavy, dragging steps, gave them a crushed, dogged air, which was infinitely painful, and bespoke a grade of misery [that was] habitual and degrading. (p. 259)

The development of a viewpoint showing sympathy and affection relies upon both a glimpse into the inward trials and struggles of the poor and a way of looking that is concerned with physiological effects; the wan look, the pinched features, the drooping and stooping, all symbolise an understanding of the material and the emotive nature of working-class abjection.

As with most accounts of workers' agitation in Social Problem Fiction, *Alton Locke* condemns political uprising; indeed, in line with Kingsley's Christian Socialism, the novel suggests a need to find solutions in kinship, peace, and re-acquaintance with the teachings of Christ. Yet, whatever solution *Alton Locke* offers, it must be constructed on an impure aesthetics influenced by the contest between Poor Law advocates like Edwin Chadwick, who believed in a statistical solution to the problem, and men like Farr, who understood that the issue also needed experience, observation, and the gloss of narrative to express its full impact and range of possible solutions. Unsurprisingly, Kingsley's bias swung heavily in favour of the latter, yet his work demonstrates the need to respond to the former – if only to reject its most positivist manifestations. Social problem fiction like Kingsley's explored the possibility of balance between narrative, sympathy-laden representations of hunger and the proactive, material aspects of modern science.

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